

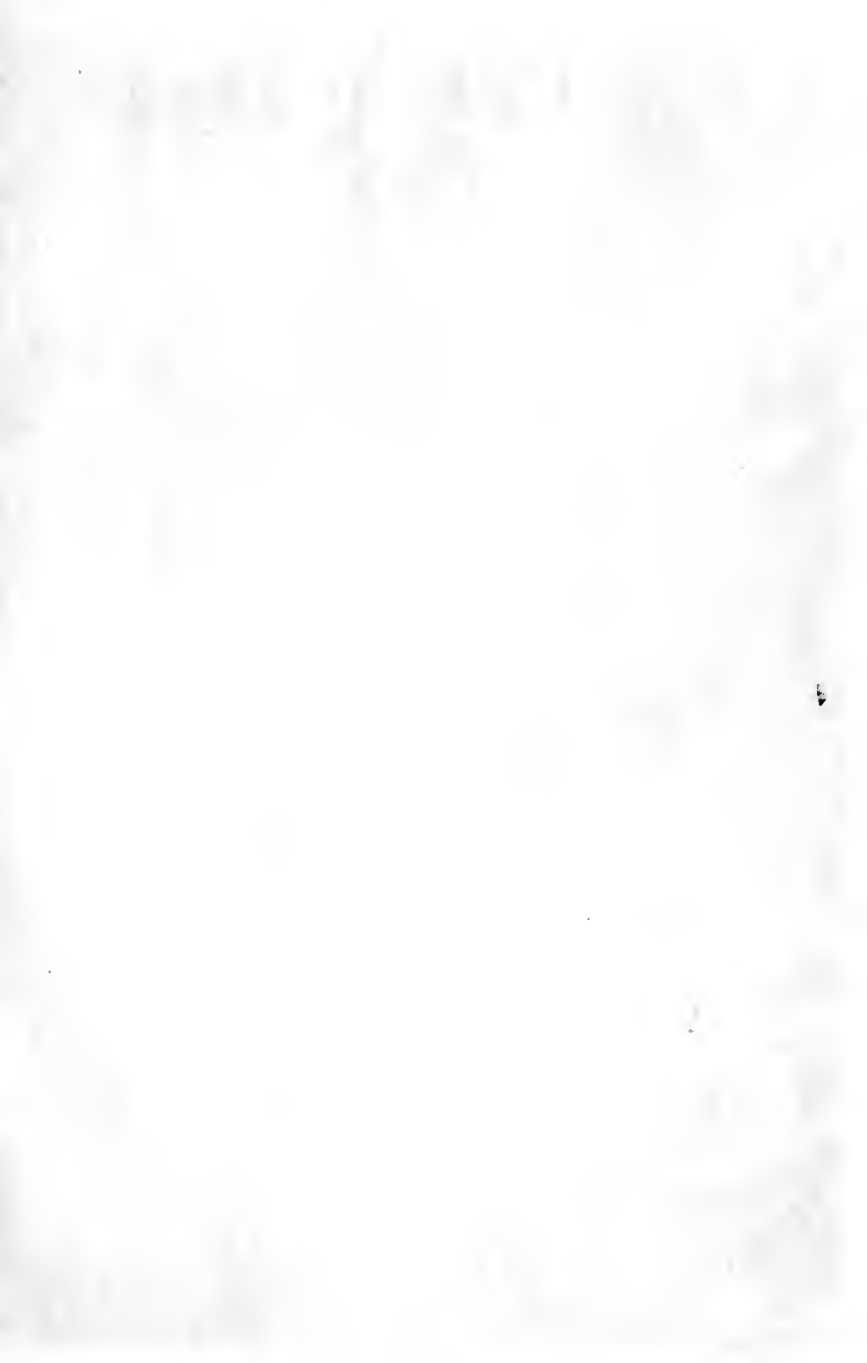
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BURNS AND FOLK-SONG

BY
ALEXANDER KEITH, M.A.

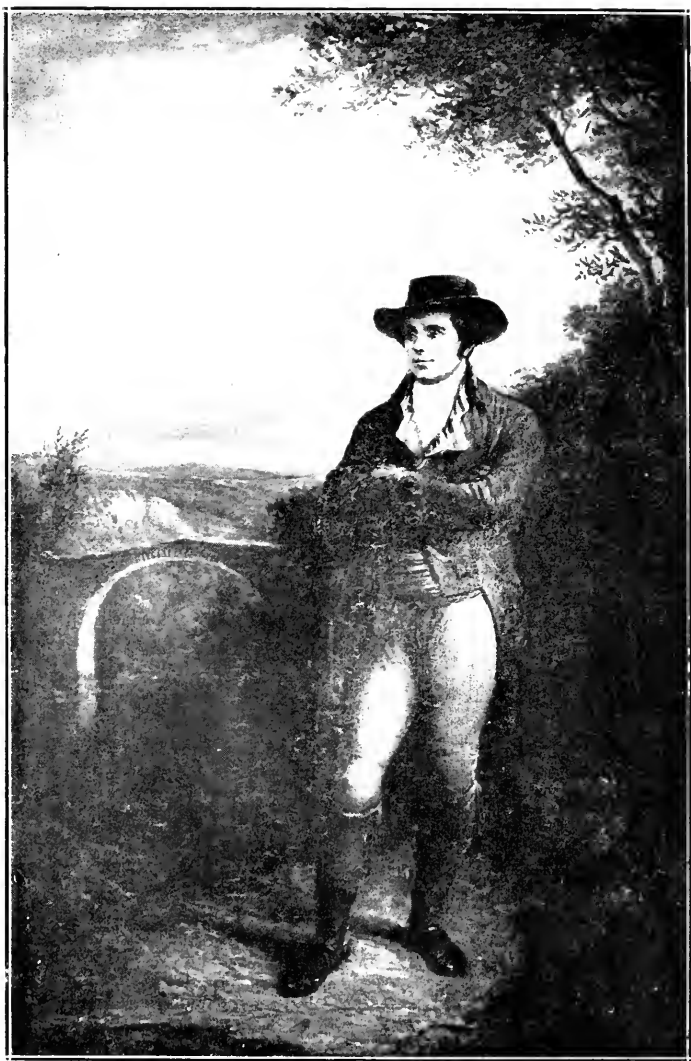
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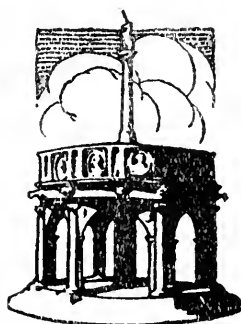


ROBERT BURNS.

From the painting by Alexander Naismyth in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Burns and Folk-song

By
ALEXANDER KEITH, M.A.
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NOTE

The first four of these papers appeared in a slightly restricted form in the "Aberdeen Journal," the Editor of which has kindly given his permission to make this further use of them. My most sincere thanks are due to Mr. William Walker, out of whose suggestion the series took shape, and who in the most ungrudging way supplied me with material when I required it and with criticism when I deserved it.

A. K.

Aberdeen, April, 1922.

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BURNS AND FOLK-SONG

The Perfection of Burns

“**T**HERE is nothing new or mysterious in Burns,” says Professor Elton, “except his perfection.”

The valuation, just in the broadest sense, can be stated with still greater economy. Save that it was individual and peculiar, Burns's perfection was not new. There had preceded him descriptive poets, narrative poets, satiric poets, lyrical poets—all of whom were and are worthy of being classed as perfect by reason of one or more of their poems. In none, however—if we agree to exclude Shakespeare—was perfection so mysterious in its origin or so faithful to its own high standard. That perfection, and not, as some would have it, his personal imperfections, real or imaginary, is the secret of his immortality; its mystery the secret of the world's persistent concern. The biggest brain in Scottish national literature is undoubtedly Scott's, but we do not celebrate his birth at every anniversary; most of us have forgotten the date of his entry into the world, if, indeed, we ever knew it. But Scott was an imperfect, a tantalisingly imperfect, genius; Burns was, when he liked, the unerring master of his art. Instead, therefore, of

indulging in more or less conventional eulogies of "rantin', rovin' Robin," it is of more satisfying interest to examine in some detail this command of artistic technique, this talent of aesthetic intuition, which are the heart and core of the glory of Burns; to consider one aspect of Burns's genius (to many minds the most splendid aspect), and, having fixed its general principles, to study it in a fuller measure of detail than is customary. However much we may idolize "Tam o' Shanter," "To a Mouse," "To a Mountain Daisy," "The Holy Fair," and all the brave company of narrative, dialogue, epistle, and satire which form such an integral part of the true Burns, no serious admirer or competent critic can afford to deny that *the* Burns is Burns the lyrist, the song-writer. Satire loses its force the moment its object disappears or is modified. Description, narrative, even sympathy with Nature, have not a universal appeal. Song, any "emotion recollected in tranquillity" or with passion, finds its echo in every human breast. It was more particularly of Burns's songs—for they alone respond to the test—that Carlyle, dour Scot analysing emotional Scot and comprehending his soul and genius as none other before or since has understood them, wrote:—

A virtue as of green fields and mountain breezes dwells in his poetry; it is redolent of natural life and hardy, natural men. There is a decisive strength in him, and yet a sweet, native gracefulness; he is tender, he is vehement, yet without con-

straint or too visible effort; he melts the heart, or inflames it, with a power which seems habitual and familiar to him. We see that in this man there was the gentleness, the trembling pity of a woman, with the deep earnestness, the force and passionate ardour of a hero. Tears lie in him, and consuming fire; as lightning lurks in the drops of the summer cloud. He has a resonance in his bosom for every note of human feeling; the high and the low, the sad, the ludicrous, the joyful, are welcome in their turns to his "lightly-moved and all-conceiving spirit."

That is the text from which every student of the songs of Burns must set out, and he will discover ere he has got to the end of his excursion that the poetic hyperbole and the deep vehemence of the Dumfries-shire historian are justified in the greater lyrics of the Ayrshire bard. On Burns's poetry, as on the literature of Ancient Greece, there are no two opinions: he is, at his highest, perfection—a perfection in its sublimity and sustained humanity altogether unique in English literature.

Herrick is our only lyricist who can challenge the lofty supremacy of Burns, and he does it so successfully that one must conclude that they are unequalled each in his own sphere, and must be contrasted rather than compared. Herrick, like Burns, was himself, and is therefore for humanity. Both were intensely religious, Burns leaning towards the modern ethical, personal Christianity, Herrick enraptured, as befitted a "high" Anglican clergyman, with the mystic beauty

and subtle emotionalism of ritual and faith. Both were sympathetic lovers of Nature, rare souls who could seek and find her soul, but Burns always in the world around him and indissolubly a part of it, Herrick consistently standing aside and regarding it with wistful pathos and keen observation. Both were catholic lovers of the opposite sex: Burns, with many more loves to his account, seeing every charm at a glance, but impatient to touch, to embrace, to experience, for, as his brother Gilbert said, "the agitations of his mind and body exceeded anything of the kind I ever knew in real life"; Herrick restrained, the detached connoisseur, unwilling to awaken out of contemplation into reality, preferring to watch, ruminating and with enjoyment, the "tempestuous petticoat," "the liquefaction" of silks, the "sweet disorder" of garments in his "sweet slug-a-bed." Both wrote surpassing songs, but whereas Burns wrote to old tunes which he had made, so to speak, part of himself, Herrick poured forth his dainty, serene verses without music, so that they do not need music, and have not, even by the accomplished Mr. Roger Quilter, been set to wholly satisfying accompaniments. Herrick we approach with a reflective, twilight pleasure; Burns is all tension, and the strain of his passionate nature communicates itself to the reader. Burns may be compared to an impetuous and tumultuous cascade, Herrick to a quiet, bubbling spring. But it would be folly to proceed further: to compare "To Meadows" with "The Lea Rig," "To Daffo-

dils " with " Ae Fond Kiss." Each poet was of his own distinctive *genre*.

" We may be sure," wrote that sound and reasonable critic, the late Professor Minto, of Aberdeen University, " that no amount of genius will produce perfect art, unless the man of genius will bestow intellectual labour on it. A perfect poem, such as many of Burns's lyric gems are, can no more be written without labour than can a statue be carved out of stone." We have been so accustomed to hear Burns hailed as a heaven-sent poet, as a spontaneous, exuberant singer, making music almost unconsciously, that we are apt to overlook or ignore the strenuous work and artistic discipline to which he was wont regularly to subject himself. He makes no bones about divulging the fact, telling us more than once in letters and notes how he used to soak his mind in an old folk tune to fill himself with the spirit of it, and then to write the song to be set to it. To Thomson he wrote in September, 1793, explaining his delay in composing words to the tune " Laddie, lie near me " :—

I do not know the air; and until I am complete master of a tune, in my own singing (such as it is), I never can compose for it. My way is : I consider the poetic sentiment correspondent to my idea of the musical expression; then choose my theme; begin one stanza; when that is composed, which is generally the most difficult part of the business, I walk out, sit down now and then, look out for subjects in nature around me that are in unison

and harmony with the cogitations of my fancy and workings of my bosom, humming every now and then the air with the verses I have framed. When I feel my muse beginning to fade, I retire to the solitary fireside of my study, and then commit my effusion to paper; swinging at intervals on the hind legs of my elbow-chair, by way of calling forth my own critical strictures as my pen goes on. Seriously, this at home is almost invariably my way.

With Burns, clearly, genius implied "an infinite capacity for taking pains," and in the eyes of students of his songs, he wrote nothing more illuminative of his perfection than this candid disclosure of his prosaic methods of composition. The result of his labour was harmonious fidelity of words to notes and of sentiment to both. Dr. Saintsbury mentions somewhere the imponderable effect which a well-known and well-esteemed tune can exercise on a song, and it is helpful to remember music's enhancement of verbal melody in studying Burns's songs or in arriving at a just appreciation of his lyrical genius.

Moreover, Burns lived in an atmosphere of folk-lore, which, however much it may have inspired him as to subjects and individual lines and phrases, could not but have been a drag on his execution had he not himself been at once the last authentic representative of the ancient troubadours and the first of the self-reliant modern singers. Whenever he desisted for a space from his work on existing models, to devote himself to original, personal lyricism, his saturation with the

traditional minstrelsy, not always of a high order, must inevitably, although doubtless unnoticed by him, have been pulling the poet back to the ballad-singing ploughman and exciseman, straining to bring the immortal part of him into conformity with the mundane. Happily, Burns the poet was stronger than the impulse of the past and the Burns who turned the furrow or confiscated contraband. His youth coincided with the crest of the first great wave of folk-song collecting. Allan Ramsay's "Tea-Table Miscellany" (which was destined to have so potent an influence on Scott) was—the earlier Watson notwithstanding—the first distinct appearance of the tide. It was followed by such collections as "The Charmer," "The Nightingale," and lesser publications; by Herd's two collections of 1769 and 1776, which owed much of their material to Ramsay; and by Bishop Percy (1765), who, with Herd, marks the first summit. Burns himself, Scott, and Ritson composed the second great wave; and there followed for a time smaller breakers like Hogg, Motherwell, Buchan, and a host of others. To Johnson's "Musical Museum" and Thomson's "Scotish Airs" Burns contributed lavishly, especially to the former. He is, therefore, entitled to be classed among our pioneers of ballad research, although he was not an exact student in the sense that the modern antiquarian science connotes, but rather nearer to the professional balladist. Burns in later life expressed his debt for much of the material of his inspiration to

an old woman who resided with the family in his childhood : " She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantrips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons, and other trumpery. This cultivated the latent seeds of poetry." Folk-knowledge and conscientious application, not solely the elusive gift of genius, made Burns an immortal singer.

The most convincing proof of his rigorous self-training is his remarkably acute powers of criticism. He mentions it as part of his lyrical routine in the Thomson letter already quoted. Whereas Scott, while rightly subordinating himself and Campbell to Burns, used to rave over that sad stick, Joanna Baillie, Burns, despite his exaggerated fondness, which he shared with his contemporaries, for the conventional versifiers of the Popean age, seldom failed to appraise Scots poetry with judgment and taste. His verdict on Fergusson, although it is repelled by several eminent critics of to-day, is nearer the truth than most people imagine, for Burns knew his own debt to Fergusson, and was from the necessities of the case more closely and practically acquainted with his abilities than any other writer. Time and again, in a word or a phrase, Burns annotates his own compositions with keen insight and commendable lucidity, and the only glaring instance which recurs to the mind of his

having harboured a false opinion is that of the superb " Mary Morison " :—" I do not think it very remarkable, either for its merits or demerits. It is impossible to be always original, entertaining, and witty " ! Perhaps by 1793, when he dismissed the song thus negligently, the glamour of its heroine, Ellison Begbie, had passed from his mind in company with some other youthful fancies. Yet, steeped as he was in folk-lore, painstaking in execution, endowed with the very spirit of the ancient minstrels, Burns would still have missed achieving universality as a modern poet, the tears would be less sincere, and the fire of him less consuming, if he had not been a man in the fullest sense of the word.

The French critic of Burns, Dr. Auguste Angellier, in the best and most elaborate study of the poet that has yet appeared, analyses and dissects Burns's character, putting it under the microscope piece by piece—his insight, his humour, his philosophy, his passion for liberty, his oneness with nature, his intimacy with extra-human life, his knowledge of the human heart. Dr. Angellier has gathered and arranged a long and exhaustive catalogue of the components of love which Burns illustrates in the songs, and as the lyrics centre for the most part round this omnipotent and omnipresent phenomenon of human society, it has got to be acknowledged that the appeal of the songs depends materially on the amorous ventures of the poet and the wisdom or regrets they brought him.

The old minstrel and his audience were acquainted with family love, the love of a man for a maid, and friendship—the positives and negatives of these—but of their infinite variations and sub-classes they did not pretend to the faintest comprehension. Nothing mattered beyond the facts. Burns, although he was not consciously a psychologist — and after a few years of Freudian pornography masquerading as exact science one may hazard the opinion that many a conscious psychologist is unconsciously an ass—could not refrain from a persistent scrutiny of the human heart. He poured the wine of profound self-knowledge into the ancient ballads and stirred the folk-songs to a second life, invigorating their unaffected wisdom with the multifold knowledge of modern experience. The fact that his philosophy is empirical, not theoretical, may separate him definitely from many of his successors in poetry, but it at the same time brings him closer to truth as we find it in the world and to the human heart.

Someone has declared him to be the last of the ancient poets and the first of the moderns. Inevitably he supplies a link between the Middle Ages and our own years of (miscalled) grace; his improvement, adaptations, and projection into modernity of ballad song imply the necessary nexus between yesterday and the present. To-day the old folk-songs can be appreciated for their own sake. They are natural, they are direct, simple, and forcible; yet around them hangs heavily the insistent aroma of an archaic age. We

read them, always with pleasure, but seldom without a smile at their unsophisticated fatalism and their unvarying acceptance of the facts of life without adornment. We say they are true to human nature but out of alignment with modern life and modern thought. So long as civilisation clung to tradition and type, the folk-songs were universal in their interest and truth, but the moment sons began to cease from following in the footsteps of their fathers, the ballads' audience commenced to dwindle. The ballads are nearer to the essence of life and nature than we, so much nearer that by Burns's time people were beginning to collect them as curiosities, and that an interpreter and transmuter was required to recapture their diminishing public. Burns performed that function, and he of all men was best fitted to discharge it. He had the natural, primeval heart, the straightforward intellect which belongs to the greatest in all ages, and the intricate experience which is the blessing (or curse) of those whose lot of existence falls within the modern epoch. The old order has passed. It was receding swiftly in Burns's time, but the boundless vision of one son of Nature could still discern its features in the growing distance. And he recorded them.

Music for Burns Lyrics

BURNS singled out two Scots songs as deserving of superlative praise. His preference, thus revealed, is worth a moment's thought. One, "the work of a master"—as he put it—was "Andro and his Cutty Gun":—

Blyth, blyth, blyth was she,
Blyth was she butt and ben;
And well she loo'd a Hawick gill,
And leugh to see a tappit hen.

—which provided him with the air and some little material for his own "Blythe was She." The other was John Skinner's "Tullochgorum," which he described as "the best song ever Scotland saw." Wise people elevate their eyebrows at this, expressing pained professional surprise. But when Burns indited the compliment he meant what he said and knew what he meant. He was himself composing and retouching songs which are, many of them, superior to Skinner's, but, judged from Burns's own conception of a Scots song, "Tullochgorum" was to him and may even be to us first among its peers. Burns regarded a song not simply as so many words artistically strung together, or as a noble or natural sentiment supremely expressed, or as a version that could be sung to a given music. "Song" is, to most people, a vague and loosely-defined term. To Burns it was strict and clear: a combination of words with music so exactly

harmonious in time, so completely corresponding in sentiment, that the realisation of the meaning of the one depends on the support of the other. Nowadays, we interpret "song" more diffusely, perhaps more correctly. Some lyrics, without the aid of music, are songs; some airs, without the accompaniment of a set of words, are songs. Burns's restricted definition, however, is highly important, not only in appreciating the songs themselves, but as an assistance and guide to the discovery of his lyrical method, and, judged by this standard, the rollicking zest of "Andro and his Cutty Gun," and "Tullochgorum" with its intricate lilt, peculiarly Scottish, and its deep-hidden essential motive, embodied characteristically both in the melody and in Skinner's words, deserve the eulogy which Burns, who understood by experience the difficulty of achieving concord, saw fit to bestow on them.

Burns was a musician. Outside his imaginative resource and human wisdom, he was compelled to draw upon both the words and the tunes of the old folk-songs, in his own compositions. It is often objected that Burns had no ear for music and an unmanageable singing voice. To this view his first and only school-master, John Murdoch, and his own letters and common-place book lend a partial authority. Yet, when we find Maria Riddell descanting on the magic of his speaking voice, "sonorous, replete with the finest modulations," we begin to suspect that, if he could scarcely "distinguish one tune from another" when

he was a boy, his "soughing" in later life was faithful to the air "soughed," although he might not have been a likely subject for a concert encore. It is not necessary for a musician to have a voice like a seraph or the executive skill of an Orpheus. The late J. C. Dick, in his two invaluable commentaries, "The Songs of Robert Burns" and "Notes on Scottish Song by Robert Burns," effectively dissipates the generally accepted theory that the poet lacked musicianly qualities. On the contrary, his intimacy with the songs of his native land was a great deal more searching and assured than that of most of his editors. He was a proficient dancer (which implies a discriminating ear for time and rhythm); he could play strathspeys and probably most of the simpler melodies on his violin; he could aspire to be a composer himself, and had the rare ability and discernment to scrap his effort and shun the temptation; he could collect airs from the singing of country girls; he could supervise the general editing of the "Scots Musical Museum" (Stephen Clarke being, of course, musical editor); he could retain in his memory a nice perception of the nature, idiosyncrasies, and affinities of several hundred tunes; he could criticise elementary music; and he could give directions as to improvements in the time and setting of scores. These competences are, strictly speaking, corollaries to the fundamental, indisputable, and undisputed fact that Burns was a master song-writer. He was as much a leader in the recovery of Scots music

as he was a pioneer in the restoration of folk-song to its proper position in literature. From 1700 to 1780 no fewer than twenty-one collections of Scots airs were published, in addition to some eighteen collections, wholly or partly Scots, of songs with music. Burns followed these up with old and new versions contributed to the "Museum," and the fascination of his own songs infected subsequent generations. Donning the mantle of Fergusson — and again we pause to stress the links that bound the greater disciple to his great master—he acclaimed "Tullochgorum," words and song, as the author of "The Daft Days" had praised the air; he set himself to cultivate for his own delight the melodies of his country and to re-awaken in his contemporaries that love for them which was threatened with supersession by a new infatuation.

He seems to have taken Fergusson's stanza for his text :—

Now foreign sonnets bear the gree,
An' crabbit queer variety
O' sounds fresh sprung frae Italy,
A bastard breed !
Unlike that saft-tongu'd Melody
Whilk now lies dead.

And his mission was wonderfully successful. Had there been no "Scots Wha Hae," the air of "Hey Tutti Taiti" would have been forgotten long since; without "Duncan Gray" and "John Anderson, my Jo," where would these tunes be now? As it is, the modern settings of many of the Burns song-tunes are less

adapted to the words than were the versions for which Burns wrote — “ Corn Rigs,” “ Green Grow the Rashes,” and “ The Lea Rig ” are examples—but a study of the airs to which the songs were written reveals a delicacy of ear and a familiarity with the essential principles of melody which confirm Dick in his contention that Burns was more than a lyrist; he was a subtle and magical tone-poet. Consider the contrast in method between “ Bonie Wee Thing,” “ O’er the Water to Charlie,” “ Comin’ thro’ the Rye,” “ O’ a’ the Airts,” “ Willie Brewed,” and “Auld Lang Syne.” Each song portrays a different emotion in the particular fashion which beyond all others satisfies our minds. “ Bonie Wee Thing,” sung to the violin’s accompaniment, is more than a mere melody. The alternation of open and closed vowel sounds, joined with the slurs and runs of the music, become in some mysterious way full harmony. A bass is, aesthetically considered, superfluous. The faint reminiscence of a pibroch effect lends an added emphasis to the theme. In “ Mary Morison ” Burns achieved his greatest tonal triumph. It made its first appearance in Currie,* to the tune

* Currie gives “ Mary Morison ” to the tune “ Bide Ye Yet ” in a letter from Burns to Thomson; Scott Douglas, on whose accuracy implicit reliance may be placed, gives “ Mary Morison ” to the tune “ Duncan Davison,” enclosed in a letter identical with that of Currie save for an additional sentence at the end. The rhythm of “ Mary Morison ” could not have fitted into that of “ Bide Ye Yet.” The air to which the song is now sung is “ The Miller,” to which it was set by John Wilson, the famous Scots vocalist.—Cf. Scott Douglas’s “ Burns,” Vol. I., p. 27; and George Farquhar Graham’s “ The Songs of Scotland,” Vol. II., p. 9.

“ Bide Ye Yet,” but when Burns sent it to Thomson, who did not use it, he directed it to be sung to the air “ Duncan Davison,” and it is through “ Duncan Davison ” that “ Mary Morison ” most decisively captivates. The tone-waves of the air are heavy, with an imperfectly repressed passion, which finds its outlet twice in the second half of the melody, while the level *ritardando* movements at the end of the fourth and eighth bars give poignancy and a lingering period to the thought. In all three verses of the song Burns follows each variation of the musical motive with exact similarity of verbal expression. These two instances, chosen because they mark the high-water line of the tide of Burns’s songs, will serve to illustrate his implicit oneness with the spirit of the national music. But in truth he was not the first tone-poet in Scottish literary history. “ There were great men living before Agamemnon,” and among the innominate lyrists of the earlier folk there were men who could with equal and exquisite sensibility match words with music or music with words. The old song and air, “ To the Weaver’s Gin Ye Go,” have this difficult but desirable homogeneity. Burns lifted the air and the chorus of the song for his own composition of the same name, and although he himself very effectively caught the motive of the tune in his adapted words, the original chorus is still more completely redolent of the music; or, better, and perhaps more correctly, the air is a perfect musical expression to the old chorus. Sprightly enough

through three-quarters of its length, it drops to the minor in the concluding bar, with an odd simulation of warning, a sort of admonitory, cautious finger wagged before the face of the lassie to enforce the prophecy of the dire consequences, "to the weaver's gin ye go." Those old master-minstrels and master-musicians of the past have, at their best, little to fear in a comparison with their less shadowy successors.

For many reasons, not the least of which is that Burns loved to write to neglected folk airs and to dance tunes, and could scarcely help writing to them with unimpeachable fidelity of spirit and sentiment, the influence of the national music on his songs is usually considerable and sometimes directional and formative. When an expert in the elementary music of his country (and that is the only conclusion that presents itself on this aspect of Burns's art) bends his genius to the duplication of that musical expression by giving it words to supplement and interpret its melody, and when he performs his task so that verses and airs fit into each other as though they had never been and could never with propriety be sundered, there is bound to be a consequent mutual reaction between the components of the finished songs. To qualify this reciprocity, however, there were the facts that the forms of the airs were more firmly established and more precise than those of his folk-song sources, and that Burns's allegiance was almost equally divided between both. Thus it comes about that while the interchange

of influence was, on the side of the lyrics, confined practically to those adjustments of the airs which Burns on occasion advised, it was, on the part of the melodies, directed with abundant power on the scope and spirit of the verses. Burns's method of working through the air to the adjustment of an old or to the composition of a new song rendered this preponderance inevitable. Hence Burns's songs are national in a threefold sense : they were written by a Scot of Scots ; they were derived in greater or less measure from the folk-songs of Scotland or from Scottish versions of folk-songs ; and they were impregnated with the atmosphere of Scots music.

In his *Essay on Burns* in the Centenary Edition, Henley hails the poetic period, which truly opened with the leasing of Mossgiel, in the words :—

At last the hour of the Vernacular Muse has come, and he is hip to haunch with such adepts in her mystery as the Sempills, and Hamilton of Gilbertfield, and Allan Ramsay, and Robert Fergusson, and the innominates whose verses, decent or not, have lived in his ear since childhood : catching their tone and their sentiment, mastering their rhythms, copying their methods, considering their effects in the one true language of his mind.

The statement is sweeping, but not to be cavilled at on any score ; and it is a cause of disappointment that the Centenary Edition, with all its pretensions and despite its carefully compiled text, is not always dis-

tinguished for exact truth and reasonable analysis of the sources of Burns. That, however, is another story, to be treated in more detail later. When Burns, already familiarly acquainted with the songs of Scotland, commenced to write, he did not at once select the lyric as a serious medium. He flirted with it. Probably the reason for his diffidence was that the vision of the potentialities of the song had not yet been vouchsafed to him. Until his day, the national song owed its existence almost in its entirety to anonymous poets, much of whose output was mediocre. With the exception of Allan Ramsay, who was rather a work-a-day lyrist, and the scanty song production of Alexander Montgomerie, Hamilton of Gilbertfield, Skinner (with whom Burns was then unacquainted), Jean Elliot, and one or two others, all the song of Scotland belonged to the folk, and, by reason of being traditional and unwritten, had gradually acquired a communal authorship. Burns was, if not the first, at least the contemporary of the chief known Scots lyrists: Lady Nairne, Lady Anne Barnard, Tannahill, Hogg, Scott, Motherwell, and Cunningham were at his side, or about to follow at his heels. At the start, therefore, Burns took his models, as might have been expected, from the old masters of the epistolary and elegiac styles, and when he eventually struck out into song, Fergusson alone of these remained to tutor him — Fergusson who, although no lyrist himself, was a wizard in verbal melody and a consummate artist in the vernacular.

Even his influence was initiatory rather than permanently active.

In song-writing and song-adapting, Burns had to rely on his own taste in selection. It is not too much to say that the infinite delicacy of feeling which this ploughman disclosed is marvellous. He seemed to know instinctively when to reject the coarse towards which his originals were continually tempting him; he could discern the faults of refinement and expression in Ramsay; he chose almost invariably the word which was not only appropriate to the sense but most captivating to the ear. He found, certainly, in many of the old ballads traces and scraps of this culture, the legacies of some noble soul dead and wholly forgotten. Take the folk-song from which Burns wrote "O Were My Love," and got, it may be, one thought for "A Red, Red Rose"—

O gin my love were yon red rose,
That grows upon the castle wa'!
And I mysell a drap of dew,
Into her bonny breast to fa'!

Oh, there beyond expression blest
I'd feast on beauty a' the night;
Seal'd on her silk-saft folds to rest,
Till flyed awa' by Phoebus light.

Notwithstanding the characteristically Scots *gaucherie* in the introduction of a discordant mythological deity, and the later addition of a wholly bathetic chorus, the song remains the monument of a mind elevated above

rusticity and situated apart from the sensual insincerities of the Court. "O Gin my Love," or a variant, was known to Burns, although he could not equal it. But he had the same discernment of the beauty of words in his own heart. Henley, in the course of his Essay, asserts:—"If we be in quest of Beauty, we must e'en ignore him and 'fall to our English'"; but that is an over-statement, characteristically pontifical, due to Henley's English birth and ear. In Burns's poetry, it is true, we never find the "love for lovely words" over-riding the sentiment which the words convey—in Fergusson, among all the Scottish poets, we discover glimpses of that wholly aesthetic and sometimes decadent quality—but in such masterpieces as "Mary Morison" we come, to linger, upon beauty allied to sense, the one in no way subordinated to the other:—

Yestreen, when to the trembling string,
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha',
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard or saw:
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I sigh'd and said among them a'—
Ye are na Mary Morison.

For "one of my juvenile works" this is an astonishing exercise in technical dexterity, even if no one is likely to be surprised at the quiet loveliness and subdued passion of it. The strain continues to the end of his life, crested here and there is such songs

as "Lassie wi' the Lint-White Locks," "Ca' the Yowes," "The Lea Rig"—

When o'er the hill the Eastern star
Tells bughtin time is near, my jo,
And owsen frae the furrow'd field
Return sae dowf and weary, O.

—one of the sweetest and most artless verses in Scots poetry; "Ae Fond Kiss," and (also very notably) in the second stanza of the first version and the last two quatrains of the second version of "The Banks o' Doon." The simplicity and truth of the folk-songs were assuredly an integral part of Burns's genius before he became a serious lyrist; whether these qualities were unconsciously derived by him from the folk-songs which he learned in his youth does not really matter, although his parentage, his character, his career, and his personal commentaries tend to indicate that they were inherent in his nature.

Folk-song in Burns's Day

ROBERT BURNS was born into a rustic society which was still disposed to utilise its lighter fireside moments for the singing or recitation of ballads and the singing of folk-songs. To the modern curious in such matters, these were the good old days indeed, when every peasant had his stock of folk-songs in his memory, and could give of it without effort and without reserve. Times are sadly different now, when it has become something of a task to search out the select few, the last lingering remnants that are still possessed of ballad and folk-knowledge, and in whom the songs of past generations are still kept with difficulty alive. That Watson and Ramsay, in the opening decades of the Eighteenth Century, considered it an attractive speculation—and the buoyant wigmaker had always his weather-eye on business—to publish their collections of verse with oddments of folk-song and folk-song imitations seems to postulate a certain circumscribing of the nation's acquaintance with the traditional minstrelsy; but those preliminary symptoms of estrangement were, we may feel confident, as yet confined to the cities, where the decay of manners and customs always commences first. The chances are, however, that had Burns not arisen, the rural districts would imperceptibly have been contaminated by the indiffer-

ence of the towns, and that the unwritten folk-song of Scotland would have been far more generally forgotten now than is actually the case. Watson, Ramsay, the "Charmer," "Lark," and "Nightingale" editors, and Herd, in their commercial or inconsequent ways, helped materially to arrest the obsolescence (already apparent in the cities) of the Scots tongue and the Scots folk-literature, by appealing with a new fashion to the craze for that which is new, or old enough to be thought new, so persistent a characteristic of urban society. Thomson, Bremner, Oswald, M'Gibbon, M'Glashan, and Gow performed a somewhat similar function for the national music, though to a rather wider audience. It remained for Burns to catch the ear and heart of all Scotland, and of the world at large, with both tunes and songs.

Burns, however, did not achieve his object without inflicting damage on the popularity of the traditional songs. His own compositions, more tuneful, more charming, and more variously emotional than the rougher and less pretentious sources from which they were derived, could not fail to oust from prime esteem many of their models, however much these may have merited a less sudden taking-off. Thereafter, numbers of the old favourites of minstrelsy, supplanted by a new and better and as national a song-literature, were doomed, after many generations of floating hither and thither throughout the country, to gravitate into eddies and back-waters, whence, in our own time, they were

to be retrieved by the alert acquisitiveness of trained collectors. Nevertheless, the advent of Burns did not imply the total annihilation of the folk-song. Several hundreds survived—not always, we may assume, the best of them—to fade and fail in the twentieth century; but, lacking the virility and art of Burns's lyrics, they could not hope to keep pace in vogue with the latter for any extended period of time. What actually happened was that Burns's lyricism by degrees took the place of traditional lyricism in all subjects on which he had adequately touched, individual tastes alone preventing the total disappearance of folk-song on these topics. On those intimate aspects of life with which Burns had failed to deal comprehensively, and in strictly parochial subjects, folk-song continued to flourish. In addition, numerous broadsides and chaps, many of them undated, published in the years before Burns or in the period immediately succeeding his death, helped to maintain a spurious health among versions of old ballads and songs, but the likelihood is that these printed sets (of which more presently) had a greater fascination for such as were either discriminatingly or pseudo-scientifically interested in the traditional literature than for the common people. Supposition and conjecture must, of course, be the main foundations of belief for an account of this critical, and inadequately chronicled, phase of folk-song history; but the balance of probability, in the light of present-day knowledge, inclines towards a development on these

lines. The fireside hour of ballad and song is no longer. A new generation has arrived that knows not the innominates. In the privacy of the home, in the kitchen or the bothy, in the byre or in the fields, if there is lilting it is not of the traditional songs of the folk, except in districts and on occasions so rare as to be altogether negligible. On the concert platform the folk-song is almost unknown. Burns has supplanted it, and where Scots songs still hold favour, he and Lady Nairne, Hogg and Tannahill, among them provide the songs.

No one who is more than superficially acquainted with the ramifications of folk-song literature has the presumption or folly to select out of the bewildering mass of variants that are available the parent sets of this song and that. It is permissible to surmise that some of the patriotic ballads, with a thin sprinkling of love-songs, date back to the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, but the identity of their authors and whether their present fragments retain a semblance of the original drafts must remain for ever unsolved. It is permissible, after a life-time of intimacy and research, to select, as did the late Professor Child, one version of a song out of many to which the credibility attaches that it is the nearest to the original; but the proposition is not conclusive, although it may be accepted for want of absolute proof. Folk-song was not transcribed from one crude manuscript to another; it was orally trans-

active?

mitted from one person to his neighbour and from one parish to the next; and anyone with the slightest conception of the untrustworthiness of the human memory, of the persistent lust for meddling with verse that is inherent in the sorriest rhymester, and of the genuine desire to improve which animates those with a gift of song, will realise that there is nothing either remarkable or suspect in the numerous readings of a single ballad which it is possible to gather. To such commentators no surprise is occasioned by the discovery in Aberdeenshire of a "Willie's Drowned in Gameraie" comparable with and parallel to a "Willie's Drowned in Yarrow" from Selkirkshire, nor does a similarity between an English folk-song and a Scots come as a miraculous phenomenon or appear as an instance of heinous plagiarism. The parallels and similarities are to be expected; and, although in the "Robin Hood" group, for instance, the evidence of an English origin is irrefutable, in a host of others it would be temerity to dogmatise as to English or Scottish authorship.

All this must be taken into account in ascertaining, or attempting to define, the sources of Burns's lyrics. Frequently, in the Interleaved Copy of the "Museum," or in the MS. in Edinburgh University, a transcript of which was recently published by Mr. Davidson Cook,* he cites the particular old version which inspired him to the composition of a new set. As frequently,

* "Annotations of Scottish Songs by Burns," in the "Annual Burns Chronicle," 1922. Fifty copies of the article were reprinted.

the title or the chorus of a Burns song presents the clue to a known folk-song, though it does not determine the precise version which the poet had in mind. But, with the exception of the cases in which we have Burns's own copy of the old songs, we can never asseverate with sound confidence that "this was the traditional version wrought on by Burns for this song, and that for that." Nor, when some remote collector comes forward with a new version (meritorious or not) of some song which has definite affinities with a Burns lyric, can we dismiss his contribution as spurious or impertinent. Such tactics may have seemed legitimate and reasonable to the editors of the Centenary Edition of Burns, but they are fit, in the eyes of those more discriminating and less impressed with their own omniscience, only to be spurned as illogical and unworthy. A moment's reflection and a very commonplace illustration will substantiate the claim that in considering folk-song literature dogma must be excluded. If one person selected at random from twenty in a room is requested to whisper a sentence into the ear of his neighbour, and if the latter passes on the words as he understood them to his neighbour, the process continuing until the whole company has been included; and if each individual writes down the sentence as he got it, the number of variants will be nearer a score than a dozen. The circulation of folk-song is analogous, for it flourishes, or did flourish in Burns's time, among a people relatively illiterate,

unable as a rule to read or to write fluently, who had to depend on their memories for the retention and transmission of the ballads that were current among them. "Burns's knowledge of the older minstrelsy was unique; he was saturate with its tradition, as he was absolute master of its emotions and effects; no such artist in folk-song as he (so in other words Sir Walter said) has ever worked in literature."*

From his father it is improbable that Burns picked up many songs of the folk. William Burnes was a stern, dour man, "of stubborn, ungainly integrity, and headlong, ungovernable irascibility." Yet in his Kincardineshire youth he can scarcely have failed to become acquainted with some ballads, of which he may be presumed to have cherished the most moral. But he does not matter. His brother Robert, at Titwood, may have been less of a Calvinist, and therefore more communicative, but his contribution to the poet's store is equally immaterial so far as Burns's acquirement of North-Eastern versions goes. His tour through the Highlands, Morayshire, Banffshire, Aberdeenshire, and the Mearns must, to a folk-song collector so indefatigable as he, have ensured the provision of several sets and variants. His intimacy with Ayrshire versions would of necessity have been both wide and profound, even had his mother not been of

* "Robert Burns," Centenary Edition, Vol. III., p. 295. Unfortunately the Editors forget their earlier remarks in their Notes on the Songs.

the vivacious temperament that is associated with lyricism, and had there not lived with the family an old woman with a plenteous reservoir of tradition. Ploughmen and girls, at their work and at dances, supplied Burns with a wealth of folk-song; and from his disreputable, seafaring friend of Irvine, Richard Brown, he would lay in a sufficiency of ditties, not all of the "Merry Muses" flavour. When the Kilmarnock Edition brought him fame, and enticed him to Edinburgh, he found among the elegant *literati* of the drawing-rooms and the rakish geniuses of the Crochallan Club ample and fertile fields to be garnered. His trips to the north of England and elsewhere, and his vocation as Excise Officer in Dumfries-shire, quite apart from the Gavin Hamiltons of Ayr and Robert Riddels and boon companions of Dumfries, were no less suited to equip him with trophies of his chase. In addition, he had his books — Barbour, Blind Harry, Ramsay, Fergusson, "Ossian," the "Tea-Table Miscellany," "A Collection of English Songs," and (we are at liberty to conjecture) the most notable of the song-books then published, with or without music. These collections, however, to a man of his folk-knowledge could scarcely have been entirely new. They may have helped to refresh his mind on occasion, and they must have provided him now and then with novel material, a subject, a line, or an idea, but the fact that Burns wrote "Green Grow the Rashes," and that there is a similar song with the same title and lilt

in Herd's Collection, does not prove that Burns could not have written his lyric had he never seen Herd; it only proves that Burns knew a song "Green Grow the Rashes," which may have been the same as, or a parallel of, that in Herd. Apart from his having set his own composition to the correct air, which does not, of course, appear in the Collection, it is scarcely possible that he could have known of Herd's work at the time when he wrote this youthful lyric, and when his little money and fierce energy were being devoted to the cultivation of Mossiel.

Henley and Dr. Henderson made one stupendous "discovery" in the "Centenary"*:—

As regards unpublished material, we might speak in no measured terms of the Herd MS. . . . which has hitherto escaped the notice of Burns's Editors. . . . Burns may, of course [this "of course" is delightful], have had other knowledge of some of the matter here sequestered; but that he had access to the MS. while it was in Herd's hands—(the probability is that it was submitted in the autumn of 1787)—in connexion with the "Museum" is (as we think) made abundantly clear in our Notes. It supplied him with the beginnings of over twenty songs. . . .

The temptation is to believe that the learned editors were too intoxicated with excitement over their "find" to scrutinise its value. Herd died in 1810. Burns knew Herd's volumes as the Collections of

* Vol. III., p. 296.

Wotherspoon (who merely printed them). Is it conceivable that Burns, who was scrupulous in such matters, could use twenty of Herd's unpublished songs without a word as to where he got them? Is it conceivable that he could have refrained from communicating not once but many times with Herd on their common hobby? Is it conceivable that Burns, if he had known Herd, could have allowed the most prolific folk-song collector of the day to pass without a single allusion to their acquaintance in his letters and his notes? And, waiving all these objections and granting for the sake of argument that Burns had some direct or indirect intercourse with Herd, is it not a more feasible explanation of the twenty songs coincidence to regard them as having been communicated by Burns to Herd? The only attitude that can be adopted in the matter is that of interrogation. Certain songs or fragments, closely akin to lyrics by Burns, are in Herd's unpublished MS. Burns could have picked up his originals in the countryside; where did Herd get *his* versions? The normal and sensible conclusion on the matter is that Burns was familiar with the songs, or variants of them, independent of Herd or any manuscript whatever. He and Herd were tapping the same flow.

Peter Buchan and Burns

OF the numerous individuals—authorities on literature, authorities on life, cross-examiners of facts, and collectors of folk-song and ballads—who have lent their knowledge and abilities to the elucidation of Burns's life and the annotation of his works, none has been more severely and wantonly traduced than Peter Buchan, of Peterhead, 1790-1854. During his residence in Aberdeenshire, Buchan made a large collection of traditionary songs and ballads, much of which he published himself or managed to get inserted in the volumes of others interested in the same subject. His most ambitious work, although not his first, was the "Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland," the selected fruits of fourteen years of gleaning, which were presented to the public in 1828. It is serviceable to folk-song research to put Buchan's reputation on a reliable basis. There is something more. His ability to suggest versions, out of his own store, of Burns's folk-song sources not only strengthens Burns's position as a national poet, in that it proves him to have drawn from the traditional minstrelsy all over the country, but it elucidates in a certain measure Scotland's esteem for Burns, since he improved, to the people's delight, old songs which were known some in one locality, some in another. Those old songs which Burns

adapted are the key to the secret of his national appeal, without distinction of class and place. The people received from him new versions of songs which they knew but which had seldom possessed the power of immediately and completely captivating both heart and mind. Largely through Buchan we learn that Aberdeenshire, as remote as it could well be from the native county of the poet, participated in providing him with material.

In his introduction to the "Ancient Ballads and Songs," Buchan avers that "the Ballads themselves are faithfully and honestly transcribed, and given as taken down from the mouths of the reciters: they have suffered no change since they fortunately were consigned to me by their foster parents." For several reasons, probably one of the most potent of which was jealousy of his success among contemporary collectors, Buchan's protestation of disinterestedness was not accepted, and the obverse view of his sponsorship was propounded by Peter Cunningham (a very "light weight" and quite negligible so far as authoritative criticism is concerned) very soon after the "Ancient Ballads and Songs" appeared in print. Sir Walter Scott, as a ballad-collector and furbisher himself, had inside knowledge of the art of folk-song editing as it was then practised. In 1830, writing to C. K. Sharpe on the subject of a further volume of ballads which Buchan contemplated, he mentioned that the Aberdeenshire collector "has unfortunately adopted the notion

that every alteration is an improvement, and under that idea, proposes to publish all our old friends with new faces, and this won't do." In an earlier letter to the same correspondent, however, the Sheriff referred more specifically to the detection of supposed faked and refurbished ballads and to the literary ability of the "hirsute poet of Peterhead" in the words:—"The man does not seem capable of supplying their [*i.e.*, the ballads'] want of authenticity by any tolerable degree of genius. I scarce know anything so easily discovered as the piecing and patching of an old ballad, the darns in a silk stocking are not more manifest." Scott, if he had no high opinion of Buchan's poetic gifts, at least took his ballads seriously. Among others who accepted Buchan as trustworthy, Jamieson, another ballad-collector of standing, is conspicuous. When a flea sticks to the wa', however, it adheres like glue (for of such is the nature of fleas); and the Cunningham denunciation of Buchan was almost universally accepted in England as just up to within a few years of the present, persisting still in many quarters. The defenders of the unfortunate Peter have had scant shrift among those who, apparently, have never taken the trouble to verify their own animadversions on him. These detractors have followed but one side of the story. For instance, the erudite Dr. Gruntvig, to whose rulings even Professor Child deferred, in 1855 admitted that Buchan did not practice "strict and verbal adherence to the popular tradition"

—which corroborates the strictures of the anti-Buchanites; but he also maintained that “his published collections are, taken together and compared with the contributions of any other single collector, the richest source in this branch of folk-lore out of all that up to this day have appeared before the British public.”* This the anti-Buchanites ignore, as they used to dodge the Gregory powder in their youth. Dr. T. F. Henderson, joint editor with Henley of the Centenary Edition of Burns (which reeks of antipathy to Buchan), in the chapter on Traditional Ballads and Songs in his “Scottish Vernacular Literature,” 1898, characterises much of Buchan’s 1828 Collection as “a mere farrago of unauthentic doggerel,” and amplifies his commination in a note, the burden of which is that “little confidence can be placed in Buchan.” Dr. Henderson adduces the late Professor Child, the greatest of all ballad editors, to prove his assertion, instancing the latter’s total want of confidence in the ballad-versions supplied to Buchan by James Rankine, the blind beggar of Tarwathie.

But Child did not by any means jettison Buchan although he was suspicious — groundlessly, it so happens—of Rankine. On the contrary, Mr. William Walker has computed† that of the 267 traditionary ballads not purely English in origin in Child’s Collection, the prime or most reliable texts of 91, as disclosed

* “Notes and Queries,” 14th July, 1855.

† “Peter Buchan,” 1915.

by the sources catalogued, emanate from Aberdeenshire, and of these 91 Buchan was responsible for the gathering of 37. The man who fixed one in every seven true ballads of Scotland is entitled to more than a little deference from subsequent editors and researchers. To complete the case for Buchan, two northern folk-song authorities may be cited. Mr. Walker, both in his "*Bards of Bon-Accord*," 1887, and in his "*Peter Buchan*," 1915—chiefly in the latter—strongly supports the view that the Peterhead collector's versions were substantially, and with only a few exceptions, authentic; while the late Mr. Gavin Greig, retrieving ballads in the present century throughout the same district over which Buchan had worked, came to this decisive conclusion* :—

We have satisfied ourselves that, although he may have edited his copies a bit and even supplied verses here and there, his work is in the main authentic and trustworthy. The charges sometimes made against him or his helper, Jamie Rankine, of manufacturing ballads are the outcome of ignorance and presumption on the part of certain critics who have never taken the trouble to investigate the matter.

Those who were intimate with the late Mr. Greig will understand the careful investigation and comparative analysis implied in that "we have satisfied ourselves."

* "*Folk-Song of the North-East*," No. 72; in the "*Buchan Observer*."

It will doubtless be objected that, since Buchan was an Aberdeenshire man and published a fair proportion of his ballads, the versions which Mr. Greig picked up a century later were very probably descended from Buchan's printed sets. Buchan's ballad publications, however, found but a meagre sale in the North-East; and those who did purchase the "Ancient Ballads" were not the people who knew the songs, but those of a curious turn of mind who were not familiarly acquainted with them, or who had a passion for collecting. The folk-singers could not afford the luxury of printed collections. The broadsheet and the slip-song were their only extravagances in that direction. Nor were they, in any event, interested in the packing together within the covers of a volume or two of ballads with which they were in daily contact, which were firmly implanted in their memories, and to the appreciation of which—as ballads, not as curiosities—they required no prompting. Moreover, Mr. Greig's own versions, with which he compared the Buchan sets, were demonstrably handed down by oral tradition from a period antecedent to either Buchan or Rankine. He further discovered that Rankine's intellectual equipment, apart from a tenacious memory and a certain vulpine cunning, was so contemptible that the idea of his composing anything was regarded by those who knew him, and may be similarly regarded to-day, as ludicrous. Buchan himself was in his original lucubrations so manifestly a third-rate poetaster that he could

not have decently patched a superior ballad, and the fact that he did tinker a little with the minstrelsy that came under his notice is not remarkable. D'Urfey, Ramsay, Percy, Scott, and Burns — all of whom are treated with respect—indulged their zeal for emendation, and all of them (Scott with regret) acknowledged their "repairs" with more or less accuracy. Buchan's omission similarly to confess his interference with tradition was doubtless the principal ground for his outlawry by his fellow-researchers and editors.

Buchan's contributions to the literature that has sprung up round Burns are contained in the "Works of Robert Burns," 1834, known as the Hogg and Motherwell Edition. In all the editions of the poet, apart from those immediately subsequent to his death, the importance of his place in the history of folk-song has been realised, and Motherwell, assisted by Hogg and Buchan—all three interested and versed in the traditional song of the people—capably and carefully, considering his facilities, annotated the songs of Burns with an eye to their sources. The 1834 Edition contains nearly 300 songs, to some 40 of which Buchan sent notes. With his huge MS. collection of ballads and folk-songs, Buchan must have been in a position to furnish many more apparent variants or similar songs than one in seven to his friend Motherwell, but the fact that he practised economy in his suggestions implies his recognition of the responsibility of the work and a consequent strict surveillance

of the Burns sources and parallels which may have suggested themselves to him. Had he been the charlatan that his calumniators would have us believe, he could have hoodwinked Motherwell time and again, for the latter had no check on the contributions of his assistant from the North, although he never hesitated to express his disagreement with a Buchan source or theory when his own ideas or evidence in his own possession pointed in a contrary direction. But even if we regard Buchan with a guarded eye, we cannot, so long as we are not prejudiced for or against him, reject his illustrations. They are far too near Burns, or the conceivable sources of Burns, either in spirit or expression, to be disregarded. Of the forty notes in the 1834 Edition undoubtedly contributed by Buchan, the Centenary Burns editors roast eighteen, in company with one other statement by Buchan, in which he assigned the authorship of "Whirry, Whigs, Awa'," now recognised to be a compilation, to George Halket, schoolmaster of Rathen.*

Of the eighteen notes by Buchan in the Hogg and Motherwell Edition which were pilloried in the Centenary Edition, that on "Theniel Menzies' Bonie Mary" supplies an interesting test case. Of the "Aberdeen Magazine," issued during 1788, 1789, 1790, and 1791, by James Chalmers, son of the founder of the "Aberdeen Journal," and the "facetious fellow" of

* Buchan's "Gleanings of Scarce Old Ballads," 1825.

Burns's journal, the Centenary editors, lulled to sleep in the cradle of their erudition, had never heard. Nevertheless, it existed, and is not without its importance to the Burns student. In it there appeared "The Boatie Rows," August 28, 1788; "Thainy Menzies' Bonny Mary," November 20, 1788; "Elegy on the D parted Year," January 29, 1789; "On Captain Grose's Peregrinations" ("Hear, Land o' Cakes"), September 10, 1789; "Tam Glen," December 17, 1789; "The Humble Petition of Bruar Water, to the Duke of Athole," same date; "The Elegy on Captain M——H——," October 7, 1790; "The Lament of Mary Queen of Scots," October 21, 1790. All these, except the last named, which made its initial appearance in the "Aberdeen Magazine," and was signed "R. Burns, The Scots Ploughman," and the first two, which are Burns parallels, were reprinted from or published simultaneously in other periodicals, and were anonymous, initialled "T. S.," or signed "Thomas a Linn." Mr. Davidson Cook, that assiduous delver in the overlooked corners of Burns tradition, has dealt at considerable length with these "Aberdeen Magazine" items, and brings to light several points of interest connected with their appearance in the "Aberdeen Magazine" and the means by which they found their way thither.* In his note to "Theniel Menzies' Bonie Mary" in the Hogg and Motherwell Edition Buchan says:—"I remember to have seen many years ago a copy of this

* "The Bookman," March, 1920.

song, in a very old Aberdeen Magazine, said to be by a gentleman of that city. The oldest on record is, however, from recitation, never in print." He proceeds to give the song, which is sprightly and above the average, although it contains several crudities which are absent in the much more polished "Aberdeen Magazine" version. The "Magazine" copy, with the same title as the Buchan set, has the bibliographical amplification—"The Words by a Gentleman of Aberdeen, Adapted to Music by Mr. Wilson." It is conjectured with much probability that the "gentleman of Aberdeen" was a certain John Marshall whom Burns met in Aberdeen with Chalmers and described as "Mr. Marshall, one of the *poetoe minores*." In the British Museum volume of the "Magazine" for 1788 there are MS. notes by Bishop Watson, of Laurencekirk, died 1808, in which two poems, "I sit on my Sunkie"—now known as "Logie o' Buchan"—and "Thainy Menzies," are attributed to John Marshall. He was a lawyer, but less a minor poet than a connoisseur in old verse, and it seems likely that he touched up the traditional version of "Thainy Menzies." The contention is scarcely tenable, however, that the Buchan set, "from recitation," is a corruption of the "Magazine" copy. It is full of the signs which usually indicate a rough folk-song, while the "Aberdeen Magazine" was not likely to get into the hands of the peasantry. The Centenary editors quote the Buchan note for the sake of getting in a contemptuous kick at

the Peterhead collector, "the ingenious and obliging." But Buchan was right. The Burns song is No. 156 in Johnson's "Musical Museum," vol. ii., 1788, and it is signed "Z.," which is held to imply that Burns's set is borrowed and adapted from an older song.* He certainly got the title and germ of the song when he was in the North-East, and although his lyric is different from the Aberdeen and Buchan sets, except that its second stanza has near affinities with their concluding verse, the "local colour" at the commencement—

In comin' by the Brig o' Dye,
At Darlet we a blink did tarry;

and in the chorus—

Charlie Grigor tint his plaidie,

—clearly discloses the source and place of the poet's inspiration. "Theniel Menzies" is a choice example of Burns's song method, and in this respect closely akin to "Macpherson's Farewell." It towers above its originals in beauty and strength and poetry, but without its chorus it could never have taken shape, and the chorus belongs to the folk.

* Allan Ramsay, in the "Tea-Table Miscellany," used Z to denote an old song, Q to distinguish an old song with additions, and X where the author was unknown to him. Burns's initials in the "Musical Museum" were B, R, X, and Z, but they followed a less obvious principle.

Burns Sources suggested by Buchan

THE process of ballad-collecting has only within recent years been governed by scientific rules of research. Buchan and his contemporaries had no inkling of the meticulous scrutiny with which the Twentieth Century would regard their collections. They considered it sufficient to gather the ballads, to touch them up (very often), and to perpetuate them in print; but when the modern investigator comes to collate the versions that have been from time to time rescued from the lips of the people, he requires data to guide him in ascertaining the authenticity, the age, the probable origin, and the most likely originals of all the minstrelsy that is now within his reach. Motherwell, who arranged his broadsides in chronological order as far as he could from the evidence, internal and external, at his disposal, had caught a glimpse of the necessities of his work, if it was to have a definitely scientific value; but Buchan, enthusiastic and haphazard, did not realise the supreme importance of adding pertinent notes to his collections. He does not say specifically where he got his items, nor when, nor from whom — with one or two accidental exceptions. To find and to transcribe the ballads was “the thing” in his estimation. Hence we must work

in these respects almost totally in the dark in dealing with his suggestions of Burns sources, and we can be positive in our assertions only in the rare instances where he appends the requisite information or in the more frequent cases where extraneous evidence corroborates his claims. In selecting and dealing with this outside evidence, however, the most alert care is necessary. Broad-sides and chap-books are often flimsy reeds on which to lean. An undated chap-book, or one to which the printer's name is not affixed, is wholly worthless from the point of view of the student of folk-song and Burns sources, yet there are writers, both on traditional minstrelsy and on Burns, who accept any chap-song as definite and reliable, and light-heartedly honour it as the parent of a folk-song or a Burns lyric. If the printer's name appears on a chap, the circumstance places its date within the limits of his life as a printer; the presence of a date may be accepted as final; but such subsidiaries as type, cuts, and ornaments, in the absence of a date or an *imprimatur*, are wholly worthless as a means of ascertaining the printer, since his stock-in-trade at his death usually passed on to some other member of his craft. An undated chap, therefore, is not pertinent evidence in the examination of Burns's poems, nor does it possess any utility as a guide to the folk-songs themselves, since it may deal simply in traditionary minstrelsy known before it was printed, or it may have contained the originals of spurious folk-song which, learned from its pages, came

to be included in the popular repertory. In folk-song collections compiled within the past few decades, there is a remarkable proportion of songs which are not truly of the folk, but whose origin is clearly in the sheets of made-to-order ballads printed in the towns to be hawked about the country at fairs and by itinerants. The same phenomenon of distribution can be observed to-day in the prevalence of budgets of pantomime or music-hall songs, which are the direct successors of the broadsheets of the travelling mendicants and the fairs.

Fortunately, the presence of reliable, if silent, witnesses renders it unnecessary to enlist the conjectural aid of those old publications in substantiating Buchan's claim to recognition as an annotator of Burns's songs. On one occasion Buchan condescended to give a date. In his note in the Hogg and Motherwell Edition on Burns's "What Can a Young Lassie," he quotes a parallel song of considerable merit, to which he adds the biographical information that "Miss Jean Allardyce of Pittenweem was the heroine of this song, which she addresses to her comrade, Miss Katherine Gordon of Wardass, in the year 1714." It cannot be established now that the Gordon of Wardhouse of that date had a daughter Katherine, but it is on record that he had daughters. Jean Allardyce of Pittenweem has not been traced. Buchan, however, was a frequent correspondent of the county families of Aberdeenshire, and got to know a good deal of their history, and

there was nothing in his life to suggest that he had the audacity requisite for the fabrication involved if his Wardhouse story were a figment of his own imagination. In the Centenary Edition, the following comment is made on the Pittenweem song :—" Whoever wrote it knew spelling and English better than most Scots girls knew either in 1712; must have heard Burns's words or Johnson's tune before setting pen to paper; and took a much more humorous and knowing view of the situation than any distressed damsel was like to do. Moreover, since the sole known copy is that of the ' northern collector ' [i.e., Buchan], and professes to be taken from a young lady's private letter, how was Burns to get wind of it?" To the first objection, it can be replied that since the Gordons of Wardhouse were landed gentry, their daughter in 1712 would be reasonably well educated, and her Pittenweem " comrade " must have belonged to the same social class and have received a similar education. The first part of the second objection, that the writer must have seen Burns's words, begs the question, and the alternative second part, that the writer must have known Johnson's tune, is frivolous, since the tune was older than Johnson, and was sung to an English ballad, " What Can a Young Woman do with an Old Man? " of date 1665, on the same subject. The third objection neglects the facts that the young lady was not married to her " auld man " at the time of writing the poem, and that when Buchan

calls her its "heroine" he does not necessarily infer that she was to have an "Auld Robin Gray" foisted on her. To the fourth and final objection, the answer is that Buchan does not say the song was in a private letter, nor does he claim the song as a source of Burns's lyric: his words in the Hogg and Motherwell Edition are—"The title of this [*i.e.*, Burns's] song is to be found in an old English collection of songs, and the best version of the song is what follows." He does not even suggest that Jean Allardyce composed an original song, merely that she adapted a song she already knew. Ebsworth* says of the English ballad, "What Can a Young Woman," that it is "probably unknown to all the unqualified editors and commentators on Robert Burns. He had himself adapted either Jean Allardyce's or the traditionary Scottish version floating in Ayrshire after it was forgotten in England, and composed on the theme one of his most delightful songs." C. K. Sharpe, in a note† on the Pittenweem version, remarks that it was "said to be written by Miss Jean Allardyce of Pittenweem to her friend Miss Katherine Gordon of Wardass, 1714." Doubtless he got his information from Buchan. Despite the unusually high standard of the Pittenweem song, it loses in comparison with Burns's lyric in succinctness and directness, but it betrays throughout a charming feminine touch, which

* "Roxburghe Ballads," Vol. VIII., p. 678.

† Laing's "Sharpe's 'Ballad Book,'" 1880.

perhaps accounts for its lack of compression. The gods, indeed, have seized the opportunity of this song for a little irony at the expense of the Centenary Editors. In the "Centenary" notes to "What Can a Young Lassie," attention is drawn to an old ballad, "What Shall a Young Woman do with an Old Man?" and to what the Editors call "a derivative" of it, "The Old Man Killed with the Cough," in a Motherwell Collection chap, which "derivative Burns seems to have known, and to have borrowed its rhythmus as well as its general tone and sentiment." "The Old Man Killed with the Cough" appeared in 1797.* Burns was dead!

One of the chief gadgets in the Centenary Edition theory of the sources of Burns's lyrics is the poet's acquaintance with the then unpublished items in the Herd MS. In one of the preceding essays arguments were adduced against this hypothesis. Buchan, all unwittingly, furnished another. The Peterhead collector certainly never saw the Herd MS. He could not have held his tongue about it if he had, but in all his extant correspondence no mention of it is made. Buchan furnished the Editors of the 1834 "Burns" with a very illuminating note on "Duncan Davison"—illuminating principally in respect of the "Centenary" note on the same song. The last four lines of the Burns song have a fine swing in them, and a moral not to be

* "Roxburghe Ballads," Vol. VIII., p. 862.

altogether contemned by those who desire guidance in such matters :—

A man may drink and no be drunk ;
A man may fight and no be slain ;
A man may kiss a bonie lass,
And aye be welcome back again.

Clearly, a quatrain of this distinctive description is not likely to be forgotten, once heard ; it is one of those natural expressions of “ philosophy ” which do not require to be memorised to be remembered. It was not Burns’s own, nor does it appear to have belonged to his original, which may have been the coarse “ Duncan Davison ” of the “ Merry Muses,” or a more decent song of which the “ Merry Muses ” verses might conceivably have been a parody. The Centenary editors claim that these four lines were “ merely ‘ conveyed ’ from a fragment, here first printed, in the Herd MS.” :—

I can drink and no be drunk ;
I can fight and no be slain ;
I can kiss a bonie lass,
And ay be welcome back again.

The two sets are the same : there is no gainsaying that fact ; but there was nothing to hinder Burns picking up the lines, as Herd got them, from the people. This strong probability is reinforced by Buchan, who remarks that the last four lines of Burns’s song “ are

only a little varied from the old spirited one, now rarely remembered " :—

I can drink an' no be drunk ;
 I can fight an' no be slain ;
 I can kiss my neighbour's wife,
 An' aye be welcome to my ain.

And surely this is as decidedly a parallel of the Burns lines as is Herd's fragment. The idea, in short, was too piquant, too well-expressed, to drop out of folk-song and be perpetuated exclusively in the manuscript of a collector of Burns's own day; and it still occurs, in Aberdeenshire at least. In the folk-song articles published in the press by the late Mr. Gavin Greig, the stanza quoted by Buchan appears in the song, "The Barn-Yards o' Delgaty " :—

But yet when I gang to the kirk,
 Mony's the bonnie lass I see,
 Prim sittin' by her daddy's side,
 And winkin' owre the pews to me.

I can drink and nae be drunk ;
 I can fight and nae be slain ;
 I can coort anither's lass,
 And aye be welcome to my ain.

The " Barn-Yards " is a song of the Buchan district, but one version of it incorporates a Donside ditty, greatly inferior in merit, called " Jock o' Rhynie," in which also the " I can drink " stanza is sometimes included. John Forbes Robertson (father of Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson) used to sing two stanzas

* " Folk-song of the North-East," Article IV.

of a longer song, beginning, "'Twas at Boghead I shure my first hairst," and containing the four lines of "The Barn-Yards o' Delgaty." "Jock o' Rhynie" in its turn is a parallel of "Linten Lowrin," another Aberdeenshire song,* which is sung to an air of the same name, and derives its title from the refrain,

Linten lowrin, lowrin linten,
Linten lowrin, linten lee,

which, to complete the circle, is another form of the refrain of "The Barn-Yards o' Delgaty"—

Lintrin adie, toorin adie,
Lintrin adie, toorin ae.

The "I can drink" lines supplied by Buchan to Hogg and Motherwell seem to have been taken by him from a northern version of "Duncan Davison," which brings us back to the "Merry Muses" and the only known source of Burns's song. The four lines, however, to judge from their many appearances in other songs, deserve to be called a vagabond fragment, too picturesque to be lost and always turning up in the minds of the folk.

On more than one occasion Buchan was able to provide the exact source of Burns's inspiration. "Macpherson's Farewell" is perhaps the best example. Macpherson was the famous—not, in the eyes of the people, notorious—robber whose exploits and execution

* Macleod and Boulton, "Songs of the North";
Ford, "Vagabond Songs and Ballads of Scotland."

at Banff in 1700, with its peculiar attendant circumstances, have given rise to more than one legend in the North. In these tales, which are not mutually contradictory, as is so often the case in traditional story, the town clock of Banff, which was put forward to ensure the culprit's execution before the arrival of the rumoured pardon, and the robber's fiddle are prominent and essential ingredients. In Herd's 1769 Collection, again in his 1776 "Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs," and later in Maidment's "Scottish Songs," 1859, there appear versions, closely similar to one another, of "The last words of James Macpherson, Murderer," a broadside dating back to about the beginning of the Eighteenth Century. Its four concluding lines run :—

Then wantonly and rantingly
I am resolved to die ;
And with undaunted courage I
Shall mount this fatal tree.

This the Centenary editors hold to be "the germ of Burns's refrain" in "Macpherson's Farewell," which is :—

Sae rantingly, sae wantonly,
Sae dauntingly gaed he ;
He played a spring, and danc'd it round,
Below the gallows-tree.

The same commentators reject the Peter Buchan version of the song contributed to the Hogg and Motherwell Edition as "a clumsy vamp from Burns

and his broadside original." This is the chorus of the Buchan set :—

But dantonly, and wantonly,
And rantonly I'll gae,
I'll play a tune, and dance it roun',
Below the gallows-tree.

Macpherson's fiddle and his tune in the shadow of the gallows are integral parts of the North of Scotland legend, but they do not appear in the broadside or any of its versions. The legend was indubitably antecedent to Burns, and the song quoted by Buchan agrees with the legend. Buchan, therefore, suggested the true source of Burns's lyric; the Centenary editors, intent on their depreciation of Buchan, missed it. Relatively few of Burns's sources can be fixed so confidently.

" Highland Harry " is another song with strong North associations, and Burns himself states where he found it. In the Interleaved Copy of the " Scots Musical Museum " he adds to the song the note—"The chorus I picked up from an old woman in Dunblane; the rest of the song is mine." The clue to the origin of the chorus lies in the word " Knockhaspie." Buchan wrote to Motherwell that " the old song has been known in this part of the country [*i.e.*, Aberdeenshire] for ages "; and he gave the Aberdeenshire ballad, a long, loose-jointed rigmarole of a very common type of folk-production, which centres round the unsuccessful courting of the daughter of the Laird of Knockespoek.

in Aberdeenshire, by a Highland chieftain. The penultimate verse of this ballad is as follows :—

O for him back again !
O for him back again !
I would gie a' Knockespock's land
For ae shake o' my Harry's hand

—(although Buchan's version in Hogg and Motherwell makes the name, for reasons best known to himself, " Knockhaspie's land "). The ballad has been popular in Aberdeenshire for generations, and that Burns found it in Dunblane does not controvert its clearly Aberdeenshire origin. We have, in the North-East, songs which hail from the Midlands of Scotland, and any ballad with a Highland interest is easily adaptable in any district contiguous to the Highlands. In " Lumsden's Memorials " (Edinburgh, 1889) the hero is stated to be Harry, eldest son of John Lumsden of Auchindoir, who succeeded to his father's property in 1716 and to Cushnie and Clova on the death of his cousin in 1718. The heroine was Jeannie Gordon, a daughter of Gordon of Knockespock, who, according to Peter Buchan, married Gordon of Avochie. Harry certainly enlisted, was in the Scots Greys during the Marlborough Wars, came home in 1714, joined in the " Fifteen," was taken prisoner at Preston, and banished to the plantations. He returned about two years later, married a daughter of George Gordon of Buckie, and died in 1754. The complication, in the eyes of many later commentators on the Burns lyric, arose out of the announcement by

Allan Cunningham that Knockhaspie's land was the name given to part of the farm of Mossgiel. Small reflection is needed to solve the petty riddle. Burns, struck by the similarity between "Knockespoek" and "Knockhaspie's land," was naturally constrained to write a new song, in which, however, the retention of Highland Harry fits in less well with a ditty having an Ayrshire association than with the ballad from the outskirts of the Highlands. Burns's chorus is exceedingly close to the stanza, already quoted, in Buchan's version :

O for him back again !
O for him back again !
I wad gie a' Knockhaspie's land
For Highland Harry back again.

Two others of Buchan's annotations deserve something fuller than a bare mention. Burns endeavoured to eke out the exquisite Herd fragment, "O gin my love were yon red rose," with a verse, "O were my love yon lilac fair," the inadequacy of which he candidly acknowledged. We have, therefore, on Burns's own authority, the exact inspiration of "O Were my Love," but the Herd fragment was but one version of the original song. Buchan contributed to the Hogg and Motherwell Edition a variant of the old lyric, his contribution being introduced by Motherwell as "a perfect copy of the old song." It is not, however. It consists of six verses and a chorus, but the first three verses are wholly distinct from the last three, and the two sets are given separately in the Buchan MS. in

the British Museum. The first set is patently a parody of the beautiful original, the second an adaptation with additions, while the Buchan chorus—" My bonnie luvie, she's little, she's little"—is closely allied to the better-known chorus to " O Gin my Love," " O my Love's bonny, bonny, bonny"—and both were employed in Aberdeenshire. The parody part of Buchan's version seems to have been the work of a humorous rhymster " with a dram in " :—

O gin my luvie were a' in a stoupie,
 And syne gin I were sent for barm,
 The cauldest time that ever I was,
 A kiss o' my luvie would keep me warm.

This and the other two verses are on a level with the burlesque set in the Herd MS., which would, in the first stanza, transfer the lady into " a pickle of wheat," and in the third into " a coffer of gold," while the third stanza of the Buchan parody commences—" O gin my luvie were a' in a coffer." The second, and less extravagant, part of Buchan's citation is in its first two stanzas remarkably close to the Herd Collection fragment, the second stanza being identical with the Herd second verse. The first Buchan stanza is :—

O gin my luvie were a bonnie red rose,
 Grown at the foot o' yon castle wa';
 And I mysel' a drap o' dew,
 Down on my bonnie luvie's breast to fa'.

This links up directly with " The Monthly Rose,"

a modern vamp collected in Aberdeenshire by the late Mr. Greig, the opening verse of which runs :—

If my love war a monthly rose,
Set on yon garden wa',
An' I mysel' war a drop o' dew,
On that bonnie rosie I would fa', I would fa',
On that bonnie rosie I would fa'.

“ The Monthly Rose ” contains another stanza which is lifted from “ A Red, Red Rose,” and the whole song is a patchwork of thoughts and stanzas from “ O Gin my Love,” Burns, and other popular pieces. There is another modern rhyme in the Greig Collection, “ I will set my Ship in Good Order,” which contains the lines :—

The fish may fly, and the seas go dry,
And the rocks may melter down wi' the sun,
The working men may forget their labour
Before that I do again return.

Buchan supplied to the 1834 Edition of Burns a song, “ written by Lieutenant Hinchies, as a farewell to his sweetheart,” which he too positively claimed as the original of “ A Red, Red Rose,” now universally admitted to be a composite, derived ultimately from a song with many versions, but full of imagery which is found in a multiplicity of ditties. “ A Red, Red Rose ” is the best example of Burns availing himself of phrases which had been the traditionary minstrel's stock-in-trade for generations.

Buchan once ventured into the stormy sea of chronological criticism, when he passed his opinion on

the probable date of "O'er the Water to Charlie." Both in his "Ancient Ballads and Songs" and in his note in the Hogg and Motherwell Edition, he placed this Jacobite ditty back among the songs of the Restoration. It is quite hopeless to follow his drift of mind or to seek the reasons for his ascribing to it so early a birth. In the Centenary Edition his version and his suggestion receive an equal meed of scorn, "especially as internal evidence shows that, as he gives it, it did not all exist before his own day," and because "no printed copy of any such ballad anterior to the Burns is quoted by Buchan." The craze for printed copies is one of the weaknesses of the Centenary Edition. The chorus and three of the four verses of the song as given in "Ancient Ballads and Songs" are certainly traditional in the North-East, for they were lilted by Aberdeenshire people sixty years ago, who had learned them from parents whose youth was contemporaneous with that of Burns, and who had no printed copies to refresh their memories. "O'er the Water to Charlie" is also reputed to have been part of the ballad repertory of Charles Leslie ("Mussel-mou'd Charlie"), 1677-1782, a peripatetic hawker, ballad-singer, and minstrel, who was for three-quarters of the Eighteenth Century a familiar figure in the country from the Moray Firth to the Firth of Forth.

The analysis of these several contributions which Peter Buchan made to folk-song research round the

sources of Burns may serve to show that Buchan, despite his unscientific method and the contempt with which he has been so frequently treated, was not the charlatan his detractors would have the world believe. He may have been somewhat of a fool; he certainly partook not at all of the nature of the knave. Only one of the Burns sources suggested by him has a suspicious aspect. That is his "original" for "Go, Fetch to me a Pint o' Wine." Buchan ascribes its source to a very indifferent song, the author of which he states to have been Alexander Leslie, of Edinburgh, and its date 1636. As he gives it, the song not only lacks the savour of the Seventeenth Century, but scarcely discloses a trace of the culture that might have been expected from a man of Leslie's rank. It certainly contains a seed of poetry similar to that whence springs the Burns song, but, even if the genuineness of Buchan's report of its authorship be admitted, the glossing over by a heavy and much more recent hand cannot be hid. One cannot help suspecting Peter himself: the bathetic conclusion is like his doggerel; but that does not prove him to have fabricated the germ itself:—

Ye'll bring me here a pint of wine
A server, and a silver tassie,
That I may drink before I gang
A health to my ain bonny lassie.

It is, of course, certain that the song was corrupted before Buchan laid hold of it, for natural deteriorating forces had been at work on it.

The rest of Buchan's suggestions may be summarised with the utmost brevity. For the Burns lyric, "My Nannie, O," he supplied a version of the old song, two verses being paralleled in Herd, and another from a broadside. He gave a traditional song, "It was Early in the Morning," which "at least deals in rushes," in a note to "Green grow the Rashes"; an admissible and characteristic Aberdeenshire variant of "The Tailor he fell thro' the Bed"; and a version of the old, coarse song, "To the Weaver's gin ye go." "I'll ca' in by yon Toun" evoked from him a specimen of parallel verses, and "Weary fa' you, Duncan Gray," a local variant, which, however, since it contains a specific mention of the air, "Duncan Gray," cannot be accepted as the original song. In a note to "My Hoggie" he furnishes the Aberdeenshire version, "Coxton's ae Hoggie"; he cites what is probably the original of "Hey, Ca' Thro'"; in annotating "How can I be Blythe and Glad" he corroborates Herd, and adduces a rather remote variant of the old ditty; while, in connection with "My Collier Laddie" he gives "The Collier Laddie," which might have inspired Burns. His "original" of "The Lass that Made the Bed to Me" is an easily defensible version of the Burns source, and, if we accept as authentic the uncorroborated notes by Burns or Riddel—and most of the former suspects have now been proved correct—the Buchan suggestion may even be the true source. As the source of "To Dauntion Me," Buchan proposes

a Jacobite song of the same name, whereas the Centenary Editors believe that the Burns set was "abridged and greatly improved from a song in a very old (undated) chap" in the Motherwell Collection. This chap, however, is an English print which can be ascribed to about 1790, and Burns's song appeared in the "Museum" of 1788. To continue with Buchan: he mentions a similarity between "Eppie Adair" and the old "Earl of Kilmarnock's Lament"; he supplies a clear version of the traditional "Somebody"; and he quotes a convincing source for "My Heart's in the Highlands"—whether it was written by one Donald Cameron (as Buchan declared) or belonged to Ireland (as Motherwell believed) does not matter. For the source of "The Weary Pund o' Tow" he proffers a song, bearing evidence of a chap-book origin, with the same chorus as that of the Burns lyric; and for "My Ain Kind Dearie," a version of an old song with similarities to the Burns set. His notes on "Behold the Hour" and "Craigieburn Wood" are not particularly pertinent. In addition to these, Buchan on several occasions provided, perhaps unconsciously, valuable information regarding songs sung to tunes to which Burns composed new lyrics. The outcome of any impartial examination into Buchan's contributions to Burns knowledge can only be that, while he made mistakes, was often peremptory in his opinions, had little scientific insight into the subject on which he was engaged, and lacked the exact information neces-

sary to differentiate between the true and the artificial in folk-song, he was at least a medium for the transmission from the past to his own generation of many ancient ballads and songs which he had collected. He is far from being alone in his mistakes: there are, in the Centenary Edition of Burns, which has been designated the last words on the subject, frequent examples of similar misjudgments, over-hasty acceptances of parallels as actual sources, discrepancies in dates of chaps and broadsides, and a furious chase after a new theory of the derivation of Burns's songs. To one or two of these, where they come within the scope of an examination of Buchan's suggestions, allusion has been made; but there are others, equal monuments of fallibility. Buchan had his faults and his shortcomings, but the proverb about the inhabitants of glass-houses applies to his detractors. He may have been unscientific; his contributions to Burns research are not unreliable.

The Secret of Burns's Hold on the People

A CENTURY and a quarter after Burns's death it is still a cause of amazement, and amusement, to the superficial to find him a world-poet of the first magnitude, and at the same time the only poet acclaimed as national in the world. Once a year Scotsmen in every quarter of the globe hold a solemn festival in his honour, to the accompaniments of a piper, a haggis, and a "nippie"—to the abounding merriment of onlookers. The toast of "The Immortal Memory" is proposed with unflagging zest and undiminished floods of eloquence, and drunk with the utmost serious and silent enthusiasm. Burns has gripped the heart of the Scottish nation as no other poet has captured any nation. There is no parallel to his national popularity. There is reason for wonder at his occupancy of this unique niche, but it is even more remarkable that this same narrowly national poet is acknowledged by all civilised peoples to be one of the master singers of humanity. Scotsmen own Burns, the greatest poet of their race, in a way in which Englishmen cannot aspire to own Shakespeare, yet both Burns and Shakespeare belong to the generality of men: a curious fact, not without pretensions to mystery. But the wonder of Burns goes further. He is the poet of every parish in his native nation as well as the poet of the whole nation. Aber-

deenshire worships him as a singer intimately connected with it no less sincerely than does Ayrshire, whose he is by virtue of birth; and the magic of him is as powerful to touch the heart in the Ross-shire highlands as it is sovereign along the valley of the Nith or in the glens of Annandale. Nevertheless, he was not in his life consciously a national poet. He was aware of his genius in minstrelsy, but he scarcely applied his talent to the praise of his nationality, and had little thought to immortalise a district or a scene. He sang of men and of women, for the benefit of women and men; of mankind rather than of an inconsiderable fraction of mankind; yet he is a poet parochial, national, universal. Judged by its subject, his poetry might belong only to one of these divisions, but in its effects it has spread over the three. There is less of mystery in his posthumous achievement than would at first sight appear. His triple crown is not formed of laurels grown out of his teaching or of his knowledge of the human heart, as is commonly conceived. It has a derivation from these things, but there are others, even more important.

To contend that Burns is immortal because he teaches great moral principles is an unwitting deception. It is a ludicrous spectacle to see reverend gentlemen, who Sunday after Sunday from the pulpit thunder against sin, expatiating on the righteousness of the poems of a man who, had they been his contemporaries, would have come under their ban for his

persistent misconduct. No less farcical is it to behold, on the twenty-fifth of January, a Socialist taking Burns as his text for socialism, a Communist adducing his life and work as an argument for the dictatorship of the proletariat, a Constitutionalist holding him up as an example to all conventional patriots, or an Individualist discovering in him the most rampant devotion for the complete liberty of the subject. Such testimonies are mutually destructive, and collectively render Burns a fool and all his admirers fools. No teacher so appallingly inconsistent as these varied evidences demonstrate Burns to be could hold his place in the mind of the world for a decade; no moralist who laid down one system of conduct in his works and followed its opposite in his life could hold an audience outside an Inebriates' Home. Burns did not "gently scan" his brother man when he was in satiric mood; his boon companions (although they by no means exhausted the contingent of his friends) are not in conformity with the sentiments of "A Man's a Man," and elsewhere he found "Mankind an unco squad"; his letters during the unpleasant period prior to his second marriage with Jean Armour do not indicate that where he felt his "honour grip" he made it his "border." In short, if we are to endow Burns with a didactic mission, we shall immediately be overwhelmed in a storm of contradictions that sweeps all logic utterly away. Burns's life and poetry are too intimately known to permit of any worship of him on the score of strict

morality and righteous doctrine, but the truth is that neither morality nor doctrine has any considerable part in the appreciation with which the majority of his admirers regard him. Perhaps more directly than any other poet, Burns appeals to the ordinary man and woman who are not trained critics, and who seek to find beauty, not a moral, in their pleasure: to individuals to whom the super-human knowledge of Shakespeare, the majesty of Milton, the nice satire of Pope, the utopian idealism of Shelley, the practical idealism of Browning do not penetrate, but whose hearts are forever open to the lyricism that springs from the heart. If a hundred lovers of Burns were gathered at random together, and each were requested to name that aspect of his poetry which he customarily associates with his favourite bard, ten (of the more studious) might instance some moral precept contained in his work or some transcendant quality of his poetry, the other ninety would mention "Mary Morison," "The Lea Rig," "Gae Bring to Me," "Scots Wha Hae," "Auld Lang Syne," "Afton Water," or others of his finest songs; and it is safe to assert that forty of the ninety would insist that he wrote "Annie Laurie" and "Mary o' Argyle." This points the way to the solution of the Burns secret. To the ordinary ninety, the passages which have become current texts for moralists, motto-framers, and calendar-compilers are accepted as Burns, and left at that, for the hearts of the ninety are filled to the exclusion of such considera-

tions by the beauty of the songs, and by verses which belong to the heart and humanity, not to the intellect and the philosophers.

Before proceeding to a solution of the Burns problem after this fashion, it will be advantageous to digress for a little to examine one means by which he has been assisted into his position as a world-poet, and the extent and strength of that position. The Scotsman, when he leaves home, is actuated by the substance of an oath of fealty to his native land. Burns is regarded as an item in the catalogue of the household gods, and the Scot, the farther he presses from home, becomes the more virulently Scottish and the more fervent an apostle of the Burnsian faith. The Scot abroad has a habit of keeping in the forefront of things, and through the media of Burns Nights and St. Andrew dinners he contrives to circulate his Burns propaganda among the "lesser breeds without the law." This insistent preaching of the Burns gospel explains, among other phenomena, the buying up of Burns relics and the summer invasions of the Burns country by Americans; it explains the existence of Burns Nights in Central Africa; and in some measure (but there are other considerations) it explains the recognition of Burns by the English people. On the Continent, however, and to a certain extent in England, the admirers of Burns are on a different intellectual plane from his lovers in Scotland. Beyond the Tweed and the North Sea he is regarded and accepted as an original poet, as a poet

whose work is self-contained, as a poet whose value is to be assessed in accordance with the established canons of literary criticism and the traditional standards of literary taste. The barrier of language militates against knowledge of him among the common people abroad, whereas it follows from the nature of his inspiration as a song-writer—the department of poetry from which he has extracted his universality—that it is precisely the common people who are the best judges of his genius. Fortunately, a large number of the non-Scottish enthusiasts for Burns have retained enough of that simplicity which belongs to the folk to interpret his meaning and extract his richness in a fairly adequate measure, but his meaning and his value to them are seldom so perfect and complete as to his humble fellow-countrymen at home. It is a remarkable tribute to his genius and to his expression of the inarticulate in man that he has found outside his own people champions who have laboured to perpetuate his memory by transmitting his beauties to their own public, but it is not wonderful that even the best of them have failed to grasp the attribute of his poetry which has made him the personal minstrel of every Scotsman.

Burns is a world-poet in the sense that any poet who has achieved universality is a world-poet: he appeals to those in all countries whose education is sufficient to surmount the obstacle of language, and whose taste beckons them towards the study and enjoyment of absolute poetry. His status as a national poet is of

a totally different style. He is not Scotland's national poet because his songs are assertively patriotic; very few of his lyrics centre round the patriotic motive. "Scots Wha Hae" is rarely heard in Scotland except as a quartet at a village concert, and his outbursts of national adulation, like Scott's "Breathes there a man," are more familiar during school-days than in the subsequent periods of life. Scotland may not have forgotten Bannockburn, but the excitement of independence has long since passed. Burns is a national poet because he has wormed himself into intimacy with every native of Scotland; he would not be national on the strength of "Scots Wha Hae," nor if he were the poetic prerogative of educated and artistically-minded Scotsmen only. The eloquence of Burns Night speeches—much of it of a high critical ability and originating in a noble desire for insight into human character—may stir the feelings of the Scottish people during the concluding days of January, but it does not add to their knowledge of Burns, which is the heritage of the people. The common heart of Scotland, if left to its own devices, would continue to cherish a quiet appreciation of the poet, and find its way to his pleasance without the aid of the sign-posts of academic or analytical oratory. Probably few of his humble but most devout worshippers could state any specific reason for their worship; certainly the reason, whatever it is, is embedded in his songs, which are his chief monument to-day. There is little familiarity among

the people with his poetry outside the lyrics, "Tam o' Shanter" and "The Jolly Beggars" (which is in reality a song sequence) being the outstanding exceptions. This preference is but natural. It is the song, the lyrical cry, which, whether it takes the lyrical form proper or is imparted to verses that are not anacreontic, moves most profoundly the heart of man; and the poetry of common experience fulfils this function with much less assurance and frequency. Whenever Burns touches upon the permanent features of homely life and delineates the objects of which it is composed and by which it is surrounded, he has the observant and unspoiled part of the nation for audience. A daisy and a mouse are commonplace links between to-day and yesterday, but they are of the eye and the senses rather than of the heart, to whose domain the song belongs. The lyric is the highest form of poetry, and, provided that it is born in a sincere heart, the most potent form of art. It is simple, direct, without extraneous encumbrance, and is magnetic to induce within its charm the simple and direct emotions which make up the souls of the most rustic as well as, essentially, the souls of those to whom a wider contact with progressive civilisation has brought a knowledge of the sciences—and of affectations and flippancies.

Burns is a national poet for a three-fold reason; or, better, for three distinct reasons which are implicit in himself and in his songs. The first explains the homage which he exacts from all classes, educated

and uneducated alike; the others refer more particularly to the latter, but are not without their influence in determining the attitude of the former. Burns first of all was natural: a full-blooded, animal man, aware by experience of the impulses and passions, the virtues and the foibles, of humanity, and alert to find the secret of the enjoyment of life. All men are made with the same potentialities; all men do not endeavour, by thought or by act, to explore and develop the resources of their common nature. Those who hang back cannot be poets. They may be writers of verse, but their verses, however artistic, correct, sententious, or dainty, are curiosities rather than poems that live because of the life that is in and behind them. Burns was of the living order. The incidents of his career which have gained a continuous prominence are not important as defining his frailty, but they furnish proof irrefutable that his temperamental tendency was towards excess of living. A minority—though by no means so restricted a minority as some would have us believe—indulge this very human inclination towards excess of living; the majority of us are aware that the tendency exists more or less dormant within us. Burns has, so to speak, produced credentials from his record as a man, showing that he is experienced in the elements of life, and fitted for the singing of them. Other poets, but seldom so plainly as Burns, can furnish similar testimonials. It is not a question of morality. It does not follow that to equal Burns as a poet one

must be like Burns as a man. It is a question of personal intimacy with one's own nature. Burns, without his irregularities of conduct, might have arrived at that self-knowledge; but the point is that there is no possible doubt as to his having acquired it. The fact does not require to be emphasised in connection with the poets whose source of inspiration was different; but Burns, dealing continually with the wisdom and oral experience of old folk-songs pulsating unceasingly with life and passions, might be conceived to have adopted the knowledge contained in them and to have sent it forth again at second hand, had his life not given positive evidence that his knowledge was his own. Had he lived otherwise, he would have been able to transmit the folk-songs to another generation, but he could not have re-animated them for generations whose number is indefinite. Within himself he carried the passionate, primitive, animal nature out of which the traditional songs had sprung, and within himself also he enclosed that sense of the steady, upward movement in humanity by which the unrestrained nature is transformed into beauty and sweetness. These two divisions of temperament are not incompatible; the one without the other is insincerity and wantonness, with the other, sincerity and truth. This is the summation of Burns's gifts as a poet. He sometimes contradicted himself in his life and his poems, but inconsistency in genius does not imply insincerity and falsehood. Burns, the sincere, the passionate, the true

to nature, speaks straight to humanity, whose heart, essentially, is true, passionate, and sincere.

The other two reasons for Burns's distinction as a national bard are so closely related that they can without impropriety be considered together. His lyrics are woven into the tradition of folk-song : they appear as new versions of old minstrelsy, or he inserts stanzas of his own into old sets, or he writes wholly new songs after the manner of the minstrel convention ; and almost all the songs he wrote were composed for tunes known by the folk. Each district in Scotland has its favourite or indigenous folk-songs, and its indigenous or favourite airs. Of the number of songs and tunes handled by Burns, every district in Scotland was acquainted with a few. The Burns sources suggested by Buchan disclose the extent to which the North-East had an interest in the poet's output, and each district throughout the country could produce similar illustrations of the same connection. This is the reason why Burns is of the parish, the district, as well as of the nation. It also explains, in partial measure, the acceptance of Burns across the Border, since a long and constant ballad and folk-song intercourse between England and Scotland and mutual borrowings from the old minstrelsy and from songs that did not emanate from the folk but were popular among the folk, gave Burns the same hold on the North of England as he had on the people of his own land. When Burns began to write the people had their own songs, handed down

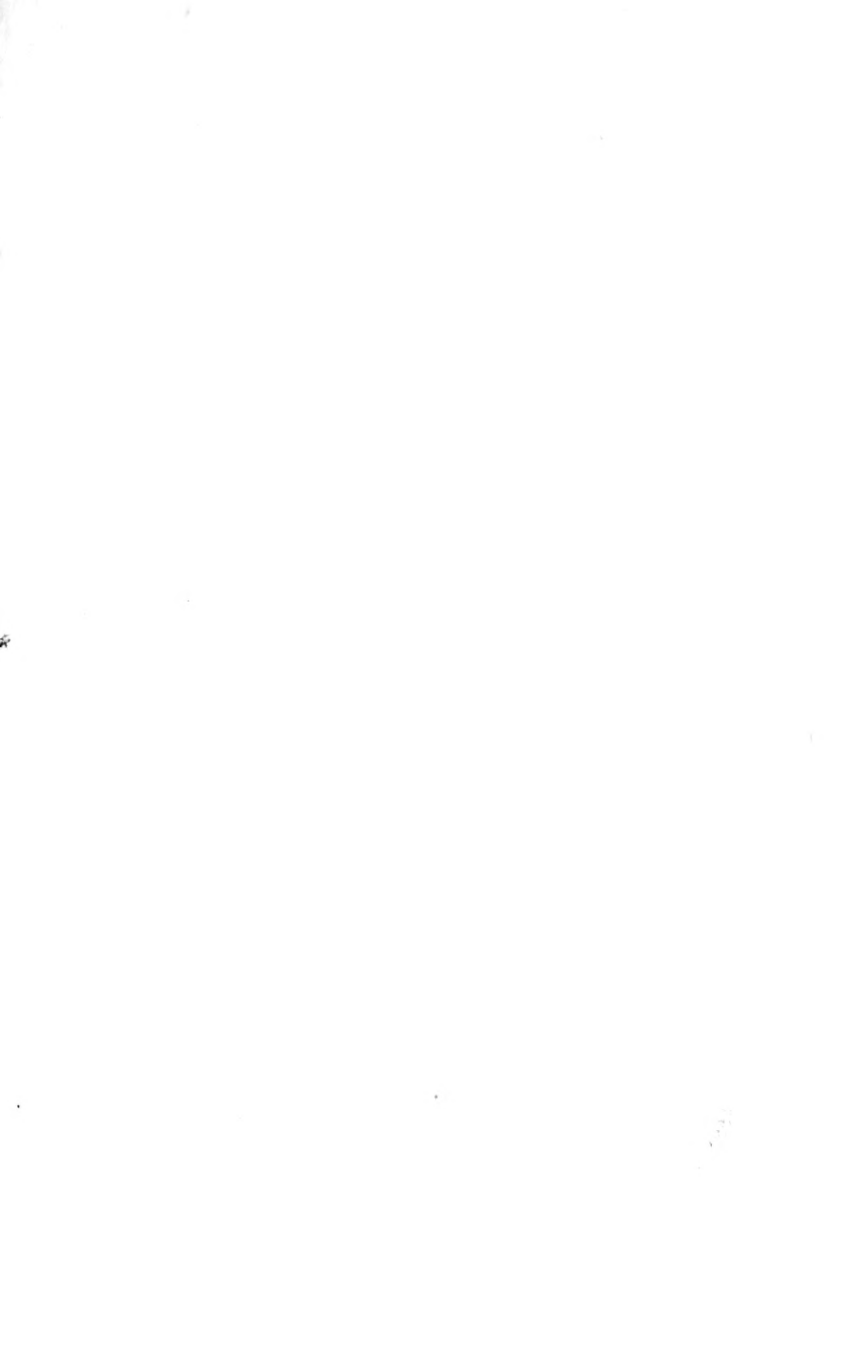
through generations from parents to children. They were getting a little threadbare, but were far from disuse and oblivion. Burns's new versions caught the ear better than the older sets from which they were derived, and the people welcomed them into the tradition; his new songs, as well as his adaptations, could be sung to airs continually on the lips or in the memory's ear of the people, and they also were absorbed into the repertory of the folk. Had Burns been less of an artist, less of a minstrel, the gradual change might never have begun, or have been resented; but his songs fitted in smoothly and insensibly, wooing by their own beauty no less than by their refined likeness to their originals and their fidelity to the common airs. That the Burns songs should displace their predecessors eventually was natural. The poet looked inwards and forwards, the old songs inwards and backwards, and the issue could not be in doubt. Burns, partly by the fate of birth, partly on his own initiative, caught that "tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune." He has found his fortune not in the mind but in the heart, a more loving and less fickle resting-place, of the people. They are not critics. "Mary o' Argyle" and "Annie Laurie" are to them Burns because these two songs have so much of the spirit of the native minstrelsy; and they are not more foolish in their belief than were the critics who discovered in "The Land o' the Leal" the last love utterance of the dying poet. The idea which

led Burns to the sources that bestowed on him a posthumous fame was not new. Allan Ramsay had conceived it before him. But honest Allan had not the tuneful heart or the fiery soul of the Ayrshire ploughman, who remained of the people so completely that the people have stayed true to him.

Sir Walter Scott in one of his letters wrote :—" I dwell among my own people." The phrase might be the epitaph of Burns. He builded his immortality upon the song of the people. He could have desired no securer foundation. On folk-song he erected his fame with a substance at once delicate and indestructible. Without his harmonious sympathy with the innominate minstrels that had gone before him, and without their assistance, Burns could never have achieved the indissoluble immortality which is his, and without Burns the people might ere now have forgotten the genius of natural truth which underlies a nation's songs.













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